

EDUCATION WEEK

American Education's Newspaper of Record

Volume XXII, Number 13 • November 27, 2002

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International Education

An Idea Whose Time Has Come

By George Walker

During the past year, internationalism has become a subject of intense debate, at once an embattled concept and a cause célèbre. Foreign affairs in general have come to feel markedly less “foreign,” and American classrooms have become battlegrounds for a nation struggling to equip students with a balanced understanding of the world.

The need to broaden our international understanding is critical, yet promoting international education remains an uphill battle. Over the past year, debates have raged over the place for critical self-examination in the teaching of American foreign policy, the correct approach to lesson plans covering the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the appropriateness of studying the Koran, the best way to cover the topic of terrorism—and the list goes on. Despite tradition-

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al resistance, however, I believe that international education is an idea whose time has come. The benefits of cross-cultural exchange are clear. The value of an international perspective is clear. And the need to prepare American students for a global environ-

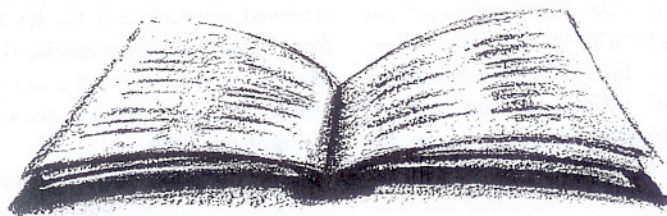
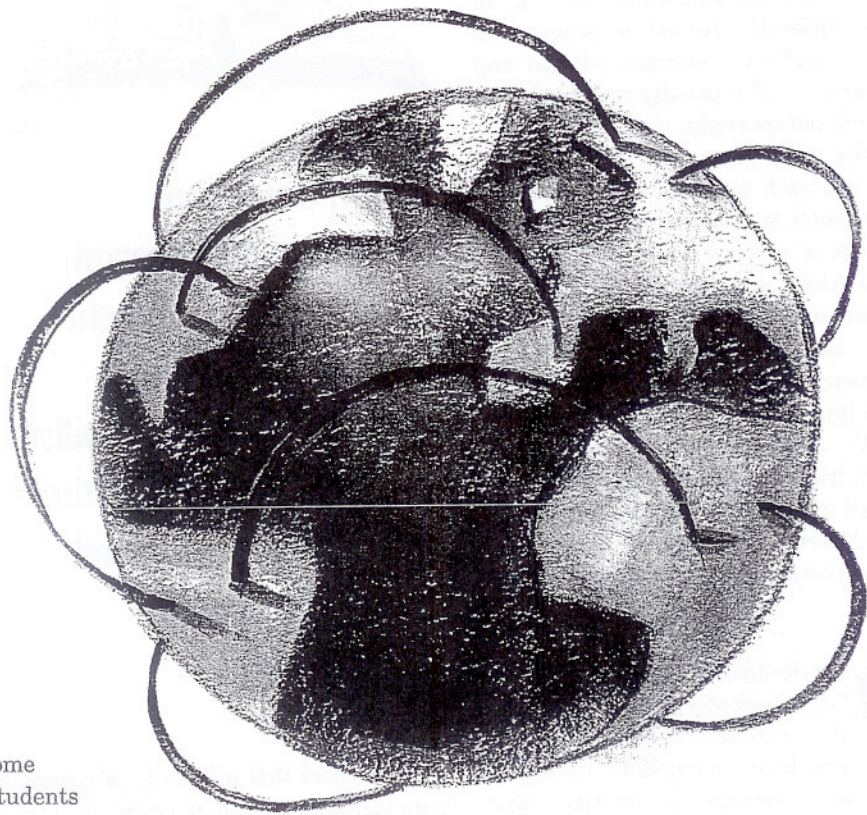
ment is clear. What remains unclear is how to turn lesson plans into a tangible sense of the world as one community.

In this context, I have a suggestion, or rather, a working model, to offer. Nearly 500 schools in North America have adopt-

ed what is widely recognized as one of the most demanding international pre-university courses in the world: the International Baccalaureate program. Remarkably, a vast majority—92 percent—are public schools, encouraged to do so by their district superintendents. The IB program champions achievement in a time of academic mediocrity, internationalism at a time of widening ethnic fault lines, and renewed energy at a time of disillusionment. A tall order, yet it is working for these schools and for schools throughout the world.

The International Baccalaureate has captured the attention of American educators for many reasons. Despite its name, and the difficulty of spelling it correctly, the International Baccalaureate does not have its roots in France or even Europe, and it does not

George Walker is the director general of the International Baccalaureate Organization, which is based in Geneva, Switzerland.



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offer a strictly foreign education. North American educators have been involved in its development since the earliest days, and by the mid-1970s, the potential for expansion into North America paved the way for the establishment of a regional headquarters office. While it requires its own internally assessed examinations, IB allows students to fulfill the requirements of their national education systems. In fact, participation in the IB program is widely hailed by American colleges and universities, and is usually rewarded with advanced college credit.

Yet the IB program is a truly international approach to education: in conception, in content, and in execution. With main offices in New York City, Geneva, Buenos Aires, and Singapore, a curriculum and assessment center in Cardiff, Wales, and sub-regional offices in Vancouver, Beijing, Mumbai, India, Stockholm, Yokohama, and Sydney, it is currently supporting school programs in 112 countries. In turn, its governance and academic committees are influenced by many different cultures as they bring together participants from all around the world.

Participation in the International Baccalaureate program involves an ongoing commitment to a worldwide partnership of schools and teachers, an element that makes the experience unique. It is not possible to simply buy the IB programs off the shelf: Each school must go through a challenging process, standardized throughout the world, of official authorization. Students and teachers around the world work with the same holistic approach to learning, cover much of the same curriculum, and are measured by the same high standards. Ongoing professional development of teachers is not only part of the IB program, it is a primary focus. In 2001 alone, over 15,000 teachers attended an array of IB workshops.

This sustained support of teachers, along with the overall high standard of education it is known for, positions the International Baccalaureate program as a natural challenge to the educational status quo. Above all, students and teachers understand the meaning and value of international cooperation because they have effectively become part of a working international community. Last year, I visited Jim Hill High School in Jackson, Miss., and saw how implementing an

international curriculum helped students feel that they are part of a bigger world, that students and teachers there can connect to students and teachers in other states and in other countries, and that this connection is helping them become global citizens.



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I said before that international education is an idea whose time has come because of a growing need for perspective and a renewed appreciation for its value. Aside from these potent reasons, the times we live in provide us with more potential to reach across borders than was once thought possible.

Again, IB offers a model of how technology can work to further the cause and reach of education. In 1999, the program launched an experimental online curriculum center, the OCC. Today, thanks in large part to a multiyear grant from the Goldman Sachs Foundation earmarked for online development, the OCC is thriving as a support center for International Baccalaureate teachers, workshop leaders, counselors, librarians, and special-needs staff members across the organization's three programs in three working languages (English, Spanish, and French).

On a Tuesday three months ago, for example, a high school psychology teacher in Alabama reached out for help. "Does anyone have any ideas on how I should tackle my lesson plan on cultural variations of learning?" he wrote. A few days later, a psychology

teacher in Tasmania began his message, "Here's how I approached that topic..." This exchange is by no means extraordinary, and it is just one of many such messages. Yet it shows that what IB is embarking on is not merely an online center for professional development, but a borderless community of teachers. Currently, almost 28,000 teachers subscribe to the online curriculum center from 965 authorized schools located all over the world, and it is expected to ultimately reach hundreds of thousands of students.

I can only hope that these small victories will bolster the call for internationalism and cross-cultural understanding in education. Education may be the only long-term way to challenge racial and ethnic prejudices. United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan said: "Education is, quite simply, peace building by another name."

In theory and practice, education should nurture an international orientation. Young people are not only entitled to have the best possible education, they are entitled to be prepared to embrace and comprehend the greater world outside. There is nothing threatening in accepting internationalism. It is important for people to realize that they are both Americans and global citizens at once. It is crucial for the future of the United States and the world.

This cannot be done only through a foreign-language or world-history class, or by running an international fair at school. International education should be incorporated into all aspects of the curriculum and extracurricular activities. We should all try to make that happen, and make knowing more about our world a lifetime commitment. ■

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EDITORIAL & BUSINESS OFFICES:
 Suite 100, 6935 Arlington Road
 Bethesda, MD 20814
 (301) 280-3100
 FAX Editorial (301) 280-3200
 FAX Business (301) 280-3250

Education Week is published 43 times per year by Editorial Projects in Education Inc. Subscriptions: U.S.: \$79.94 for 43 issues. Canada: \$135.94 for 43 issues. © 2002 Editorial Projects in Education



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